

“We Have Forsaken Our God ”

The one hundred and first in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 10:1-11:11; Luke 5:27-32

Strengthened by the Holy Spirit, Gideon saved Israel during a very dark period in the nation’s history. Gideon led a 300 man Israeli force to a stunning victory over a huge Midianite army, driving them all the way back across the Jordan River before wiping them out. Nevertheless, Gideon left behind a very mixed legacy in Israel. Gideon’s son by a Canaanite concubine, Abimelech, became one of the cruelest and most blood-thirsty figures in all the Bible. Not only did Abimelech kill his sixty-nine half brothers (Gideon’s sons by his other wives), but Abimelech’s murderous rampage was funded by the leaders of Shechem, and the church of Baal. When the only surviving son of Gideon (Jotham) pronounced a curse upon those who killed his brothers, it was not long before Abimelech turned against the leaders of Shechem who had placed him in power. Abimelech laid waste to Shechem, and then destroyed the citadel at the center of the city, killing thousands. In a rather fitting bit of irony, Abimelech himself was killed while attempting to burn a suburb of Shechem, when a woman threw a millstone from the city’s tower which hit Abimelech in the head, mortally wounding him. For three years, Israel endured his murderous and cruel reign. And now that Abimelech was dead (YHWH removed him from Israel, as a doctor removes diseased tissue from the body), the question now becomes “what will happen to Israel?” Will the people learn their lesson and turn to YHWH, or will the downward spiral continue?

Throughout the Book of Judges, so far, we have seen Israel’s continuing descent into unbelief. The Israelites continue to disobey YHWH’s commandments, even though YHWH had made his will perfectly clear to Israel when he made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai—the law and the book of the covenant. But it has been several hundred years since Israel was given the law and wandered through the wilderness of the Sinai. Now, the struggle faced by the nation is no longer that of keeping the faith when the promise had not yet been realized. Having entered the land and defeated the Canaanites, now the struggle is with the inevitable complacency which resulted after Israel took possession of the land, and actually began living in the prosperity that God had promised to them on the condition of obedience.

As we work our way through that period of redemptive history known as the time of the judges, we meet people much like ourselves. On the one hand, the Israelites are secure in the blessings of God, and yet on the other, they still struggle with their sin. Despite the presence of Levitical priests in fifty cities throughout Israel (who are to perform the necessary sacrifices and teach the people about God’s law), God’s people are surrounded by every sort of pagan temptation. The Israelites are continually being pulled away from YHWH toward the worship of Baal and Ashtoreth. They continually brought down upon themselves the covenant curses. And the judges God sends to rescue them can do nothing to deal with sin’s guilt and power, the root of all of Israel’s troubles. The parallels are obvious—we too live at a time when we are surrounded by pagan temptations, and we too are constantly being pulled away from Jesus Christ by those who delight in doing what is right in their own eyes.

Living under prosperity for the first time in generations, it was not long before the Israelites forgot all about YHWH, and all of the miraculous things he had done for them in delivering them from Egypt, and securing for them the land of Canaan. Even worse, the Israelites were now oblivious to the commandments upon which the nation was founded, and obedience to which determined whether they lived under God’s blessing or his curse. The Israelites were intermarrying with Canaanites and taking

concubines. They were even participating in the worship of Baal (and other pagan deities), and the tribal structure of the nation was coming apart at the seams. And yet, because he is merciful, God sends a series of judges (deliverers) to lead the nation against those enemies (various Canaanite tribes) who live on Israel's borders, as well as who returned to live within Israel, bringing their pagan ways with them.

The era of the judges was therefore, a difficult time in redemptive history for God's people. Soon God will raise up Jephthah and Samson—two heroic but very flawed men who continue the series of judges (rescuers) whom God raises up to save Israel from its immediate peril. YHWH will continue to allow Israel's pagan neighbors to chasten his disobedient people, and yet YHWH will fulfill his purpose for Israel, despite his people's sin. Throughout all of this, YHWH is preparing his people for a king (David), as well as a Messiah (Jesus) who alone can save his people from their sins.

Before we survey the period of Jephthah and Samson, we learn of several minor judges who ruled over Israel after Abimelech. Israel's downward slide continues, although for a time God grants to Israel a period of peace.

In Judges 10:1-5, we are introduced to two more of the so-called "minor" judges (Shamgar was the first of these minor judges—we met him back in Judges 3:31). What separates these minor "judges" from the judges with whom we are more familiar (Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Samson) is the fact that these men emerge as "judges" in Israel without any reference to a distinctive call of God. We do not know as much about them as we do the others, so either they did not do anything especially notable, or else the record of their exploits have been lost to us. Although one or both of these is the case, the minor judges mentioned here do serve to give the nation of Israel a period of relative peace that points ahead to better days during the monarchy under king David.¹ But given the tumultuous nature of Abimelech's reign, an extended period of peace when these two minor judges rule is no small thing.

The first of these two judges, Tola, is introduced in verses 1-2. *"After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died and was buried at Shamir."* What should jump out at us is the fact that it was immediately after Abimelech was killed Tola came to power "to save Israel." Clearly the nation had been through a very difficult time, and for someone like Tola to step up and rule for twenty-three years with nothing disastrous happening in Israel is a good thing.

"Tola" means worm. Most commentators take this to mean that Tola was a man of low ambition (or of modest means), in contrast to his evil predecessor, Abimelech, who is one of the most ambitious men in Scripture. We know very little about Tola's family, only that he was the son and grandson of men who were known to be from the tribe of Issachar. Tola did arise to "save Israel" (which meant he was a capable leader), and we know that he ruled from his hometown of Shamir in Ephraim. While we don't know exactly where Shamir was located, Ephraim was adjacent to the city of Shechem, so there is probably some significance to the fact that a man from this region near Shechem would rule during the power vacuum left behind by Abimelech.

The next judge mentioned is Jair. He is a transitional figure. As we read in verses 3-5, *"After [Tola] arose Jair the Gileadite, who judged Israel twenty-two years. And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead. And*

¹ Block, Judges, Ruth, 337.

Jair died and was buried in Kamon.” The twenty-two year rule of Jair serves as a transition to the next judge, Jephthah, who is likewise from Gilead. Jair means “may God enlighten” and this man was from the line of Mannaseh, which had gained control over a group of tent cities called Havvoth-jair to the east of the Jordan River in what is now Jordan. Unlike Tola, who ruled from a place nearer to the geographic center of Israel, Jair lived across the Jordan in the east. This suggests that Jair’s rule may have overlapped with that of Tola. In any case, Jair was known for the fact that he had thirty sons who rode donkeys, and ruled over the thirty tent cities to the east of the Jordan. The mention of donkeys is puzzling, and may be an indication of the relative peace and prosperity during Jair’s rule. He too ensured that Israel enjoyed a time of peace (twenty-two years), which is significant since the next out-break of trouble for Israel will come from the same geographic area (east of the Jordan), after Jair dies.

With the transitional nature of this period of minor judges in mind, we come to next cycle in which Israel forgets YHWH, is chastened by one of the pagan neighbors, so that the people of Israel cry out to YHWH for help, before YHWH raises up yet another deliverer for his people.

By now we already know what is coming in verse 6 of chapter 10, since we’ve seen this a number of times before. *“The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the Lord and did not serve him.”* Although we’ve seen this declaration, we’ve never been given such detail about Israel’s near apostasy. The Canaanization of Israel was now so complete that there are seven foreign deities mentioned here among those worshiped by Israel. We have the primary Canaanite deities (Baal and Ashtoreth), along with the “gods” of Aram (Syria) to the northeast, Sidon to the north, the gods of Moab and Ammon to the east and southeast. Finally we have the “gods” of the Philistines (the sea peoples) to the south and west.

It is certainly not accidental that the author mentions that Israel was worshiping the “gods” of the same seven nations mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:1, where Israel was told of the seven “ites” (peoples) who inhabited Canaan, whom the Lord would drive out during the Conquest.² The sad fact of the matter is that the Lord drove all seven of these tribes from Canaan, but now Israel is so thoroughly Canaanized that Israel is no longer worshiping and serving YHWH, but is instead worshiping the so-called “gods” of those “ites” who were displaced from Canaan at the time Joshua led them into the land. In many ways, this is a tragic assertion. Were it not YHWH’s faithfulness to his covenant, Israel would be no more. His own people have been theologically seduced by the same people they were to drive from the land.

When we read in verses 7-8 of YHWH’s response to the faithlessness of his people, we have the context so as to understand that YHWH is not capricious and wrathful, but he is being patient and long-suffering with Israel, a people who clearly deserve all of the covenant curses he will mete out and more. *“So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year.”* Once again, YHWH stirred up Israel’s pagan neighbors to come and chasten his people. This time God sells Israel into the hands of two different oppressors, the Ammonites and the Philistines. The mention of both of these tribes at this point in the narrative is preparing us for the next two judges (Jephthah, who delivers Israel from the Ammonites, and Samson, who delivers Israel from the Philistines). Together, these two enemies “crush” and “oppress” Israel. After some years of peace under Tola and Jair, difficult times have come to Israel yet again. YHWH will both chasten his disobedient people, as well as accomplish

² Block, Judges, Ruth, 344.

his redemptive purposes. And he will use sinful and flawed men to do it.

As for the Ammonites—the focus of the book of Judges through the end of chapter 12—we are told that *“for eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead.”* While it is easy to get confused here, remember that this is the land to the east of the Jordan River between the river and what is now the city of Amman in Jordan. So, the Ammonites were attacking those Israelites who lived to the east of the Jordan River on land originally taken from the Amorites before the conquest. The Amorites lived farther to the east, and it is easy to confuse the two. The Ammonites had their capital (chief city) in Rabbah-Amman, now the capital of Jordan. Solomon later included Ammonite women in his harem, and he even worshiped Molech and Chemosh (who were the principal Ammonite gods).³ Their descendants are the modern Jordanians.

The nature of the Ammonite oppression of Israel is spelled out in verse 9. *“And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.”* From this description it is pretty clear that the Ammonites not only harassed and attacked those Israelites living to the east of the Jordan, but that they also made armed forays across the Jordan, and attacked deep into the heart of Israel in the land of Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim, the regions which essentially surrounds the modern city of Jerusalem.

What follows takes the form of a dialogue between the people of Israel and YHWH. After eighteen years of raids and incursions, the Israelites have had enough of the Ammonites. And so as we read in verse 10. *“And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, ‘We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals.’”* Just as in verse 6, where we have an expanded list of the pagan gods Israel served, so here we find an expanded version of Israel’s cry for deliverance. The fact that the people of Israel acknowledge that YHWH is their God, shows that despite the people’s sin and apostasy, there is still some sense that people know that YHWH is the true and living God, and they are struggling because they have abandoned him for the false gods of their Canaanite neighbors.

YHWH’s response to Israel’s “repentance” is to remind his people of all that he has done for Israel. According to verses 11-14, *“And the Lord said to the people of Israel, ‘Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites [another name for the Midianites]’⁴ oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.”* YHWH recounts his perfect track record of promise-keeping to his disobedient people. He, of course, has done everything that he promised to do. He has been faithful. But his people, on the other hand, have not. Israel has forsaken him, despite all that he had done. To put it bluntly, Israel has committed spiritual adultery by serving other “gods.” And so, YHWH rejects the prayers of his people, threatening to save (“rescue”) them no more. If it is Baal the Israelites want, then it is Baal they’ll get. This is a strong indication that Israel’s prayer (verse 10), is not a genuine turning from sin to YHWH, but a cry to be delivered from yet another horrific situation which they had brought upon themselves.

YHWH’s rebuke cuts the people of Israel to the heart. As we read in verse 15, *“And the people of Israel*

³ ISBE, “Ammonites.”

⁴ Cundall, *Judges & Ruth*, 139.

said to the Lord, `We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day.’” The situation throughout Israel was terrible. Ammonite raiding parties struck deep into the heart of Israel, while the Philistines created serious trouble to the southwest. The people of Israel cry out again, knowing that YHWH is their only hope of deliverance. There are even hints of genuine repentance in verse 16. “*So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord.*” This indicates that there was not only a general sense among the people that their current predicament stemmed from the fact that they had turned their backs on YHWH and that they must seek his favor, but this tells us that the people of Israel also knew that their cries for help must be accompanied by the removal of the false “gods” and false religion which had then spread throughout Israel.

YHWH’s reaction to his people’s “repentance” is one of complete exasperation. We read that “*he became impatient over the misery of Israel.*” Some have taken this to mean that YHWH accepted the genuine nature of the people’s repentance, and relented from bring additional trials upon them. Others have taken the passage to demonstrate that this is an expression of YHWH’s frustration (exasperation) with his people because of Israel’s repeated cries for deliverance, despite an absence of genuine repentance.⁵ I take the latter to be the case. This means that YHWH is exasperated with his covenant people who have gotten themselves into deep trouble yet again. YHWH is not repenting of his purpose, nor is he sorry that Israel has come under those covenant curses, because this is a matter of divine justice. But YHWH is sorry about Israel’s plight. How he wishes his people would worship and serve him and receive all the blessings he has promised to his own, but no, they don’t, and then they suffer.⁶

As the familiar pattern of Judges plays out, after the people cry out, YHWH raises up a deliverer for his people. This time, the deliverer is a man named Jephthah. Like Abimelech, he is the son of a prostitute/concubine. But unlike Abimelech, he is someone whom God uses to deliver Israel from their current oppressor, the Ammonites. Although he is empowered by the Spirit of God, as the account of Jephthah unfolds, it is clear that his rise to power is devoid of a specific call by God. In fact, when Jephthah takes his tragic vow (which results in the sacrifice of his only daughter) we see yet again that the judges of Israel really are a mixed bag, and they can do nothing to save God’s people from their sin.

In verses 17-18, the author of Judges informs us of the great need for such a deliverer. “*Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead. And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, `Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.*” When the Ammonite army camped in Gilead (just to the east of Israel, across the Jordan), the people of Israel knew a major attack was imminent. Although the Ammonites had been sending raiding parties into Israel for some time, this time an entire army gathered. The Ammonites probably sensed the weakness throughout Israel, and knew that this would be the ideal time to conquer the entire nation.

Seeing an Ammonite army assemble, the Israelites responded by assembling a force of their own at Mizpah, also in Gilead. While there were sufficient soldiers to put up a defense, there is no one to lead the army into battle. As so the Israelites cry out, “who will lead us?”

That leader is Jephthah, who is introduced to us in verses 1-3 of chapter 11. “*Now Jephthah the*

⁵ Block, Judges, Ruth, 348-349; Wilcock, The Message of Judges, 108-109.

⁶ Wilcock, The Message of Judges, 109.

Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, 'You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.' Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him." Like Abimelech, Jephthah is the son of a prostitute, which says a great deal about the spiritual condition of his father, Gilead. Jephthah's family disowns him, and cuts him off from his inheritance. Like Abimelech, Jephthah surrounds himself with thugs. Apparently, he is a tough man and a capable leader. But is he another Abimelech?

In verses 4-6, we learn how Jephthah came to prominence. *"After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. And they said to Jephthah, 'Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites.'" Although he had been spurned by his family, now that a need arises, his people seek him out. Jephthah will use Israel's precarious situation to his own advantage. "But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?'" The desperation of the elders becomes clear in what follows. "And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, 'That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.'" Once they hated him. Now they are willing to make him head of Gilead. Desperate people will do desperate things!*

Jephthah will use this situation to his advantage. *"Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head.'" If YHWH gives him the victory then Jephthah will indeed lead the people. Those who had once rejected him, had no choice but to accept Jephthah's terms. "And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, 'The Lord will be witness between us, if we do not do as you say.' So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah."* Once again, Israel was desperate. They make a questionable man their leader because they have no king and an enemy cruelly oppresses them. And Jephthah suddenly finds himself in a place where he can strike a good deal, and gain the very thing denied him by his family.

Throughout this entire process, the reader is left to wonder, where is YHWH in all of this? He has threatened not to rescue Israel again, and so the narrative presents a picture of human desperation and ambition. Israel is in danger, and needs a leader. Jephthah has been rejected by his own, but is now sought out by those same people to lead Israel. Both sides cut a deal out of necessity—each has something the other wants. And all of this raises the question, "is Jephthah another devil, like Abimelech?" Is he a Canaanite, who will bring the nation to ruin? Lord willing, we'll take up those questions next time.

What then, do we take with us, by way of application?

Throughout this entire period of Israel's history, we see a disobedient, sinful, yet desperate people. Although the Israelites should have learned from the Abimelech episode, they are so desperate to be delivered from their enemies, they make a hasty deal with another shady character—a man who was rejected by his own family, and who has surrounded himself with thugs. As we will see next time, God will use this man to rescue his people in one of the most moving and frustrating passages in all the Bible. Therefore, what follows is not an account of the bravery and skill of Jephthah. It is a stirring account of the grace of God in using this man to save his disobedient people.

Although the people of Israel cry out to YHWH for deliverance, it is clear that their repentance is a sham.

It is also clear that the Israelites are miserable. They want the Ammonites and Philistines off their backs. They turn from false gods for a time, and they seek YHWH's aid. YHWH, on the other hand, expresses his exasperation at his people, who continually wander from him and serve false gods. Nevertheless, if this passage (and this period in biblical history) tells us anything, it tells us that God is longsuffering and merciful and will save his people from their sins, if only they seek his face. YHWH wants Israel to turn to him, to seek to do his will, and renounce the "gods" of their pagan neighbors. But all that Israel can muster is a cry of distress because the Philistines and Ammonites are oppressing them.

But the full extent of YHWH's grace and mercy cannot be seen until the coming of his son, Jesus. As we read in Luke's gospel (5:27-32), "*after this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, 'Follow me.' And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' And Jesus answered them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.'*" While the self-righteous Pharisees hated sinners, like tax-collectors and prostitutes, Jesus loved them, and called them to repentance—much to the chagrin of the self-righteous Pharisees.

In effect, this exactly what is going on in Israel during the time of the judges. YHWH is calling his sinful people to repentance. They have turned from him again, and again. But YHWH is merciful and long-suffering beyond measure. So much so, he will even use a man like Jephthah to rescue Israel. So much so, that he will send his blessed son to save tax collectors and prostitutes from their sins, if only they cry out "we have forsaken our God" and call upon the name of Jesus when he calls them to repentance.